




WHAT'S IN STORE

“YOU GET WHAT YOU PAY FOR.”





In the retail world, that adage may be the one consumers find the most debatable. For most of us, shopping is just as much about the experience as the end purchase. In cities where real estate is charged at a premium, what you pay for includes a portion of the rent, the staff's salary, the interior design and the marketing campaign to get you to part ways with your cash. Yet when the overall experience is rewarding, memorable or fun, you are getting much more than just the product you take away. You are also being entertained. And the way a shop looks has a lot to do with the level of entertainment offered.

The nagging Greek chorus of die-hard Internet shoppers may wail that downtown real estate is no longer necessary for a fantastic retail experience. And they do have a point. As online purchasing becomes more streamlined, as websites get more compelling, as images more realistically portray the actual product, the need to physically leave the home to buy something diminishes. It is no coincidence that as mobile devices and WiFi become more ubiquitous, suburban malls previously anchored by department stores have become ghost towns. But, in just the same way everyone thought the paperless office would surely follow computer domination in the workplace, smart and successful merchandisers understand that the Internet is just one engine of their business. People forking out a substantial wad of cash naturally want to test drive the car they are interested in acquiring, or to slip on a diamond ring to see how it looks against their skin. They may do their research online to narrow down their choices; they may exclusively buy certain products through their favourite websites. But no alternative shopping method can replace the enjoyment of interacting with a well-informed merchant over a coveted product. As with the exponentially increasing number of product choices available these days, the modes for acquiring those products are also increasing.

Having established that retail shops will continue to be part of our landscape for the time being, it may be argued that they face stiffer competition than ever before. Cookie-cutter or purely utilitarian design just doesn't cut it anymore when it comes to attracting consumers; even luxury brands must strike a balance between incorporating the label's DNA and rolling out standards with something fresh to entice shoppers across the threshold. Nowhere is this more evident than in a city like Hong Kong. As mainland Chinese consumers' spending dollars increase, their taste is commensurately becoming more sophisticated. Streets crammed with luxury brands alone are soon no longer going to satisfy their

fickle appetites. After all, many of the same designers are opening bigger and shinier boutiques across the border, so why bother coming to Hong Kong to fight the (possibly nasty) crowds? Indeed, mainland Chinese shoppers' expectations are changing fast; while they once used to come to Hong Kong for reliable-quality products and items simply not available back home (or available at outrageously inflated prices), now they are coming for more leisurely pursuits. That makes destination shopping all the more relevant: shoppers are seeking more than the products they are attempting to purchase.

Designing retail spaces seem to be a no-brainer. A stroll through Temple Street or Ladies' Market in Hong Kong's Kowloon district indicates that all it takes are a few hooks, some vertical surfaces for display and a vendor who can dispense the correct change. Those who specialise in shop design know that a successful space involves a multitude of factors: a shopfront with arresting display that immediately communicates the products' value and the brand's personality; intuitive circulation generous enough for customers to examine products discreetly; a strong concept that reinforces the brand's mission statement in three-dimensional form; lighting that showcases the products while supporting the brand; colours, textures and patterns that enhance rather than compete with the merchandise; music or background acoustics to tie the experience together without being intrusive; clear delineation of the cash counter, demonstration areas and temporary displays; and a basic understanding of human psychology. Shoppers may spend a few minutes in a shop, or they could be there for the better part of its opening hours. The store should cater to these extremes; it needs to be efficiently laid out to allow customers to quickly find what they are looking for, while being a comfortably worthwhile investment of their time so that they will want to repeat their experience.

Due to the nature of the discipline, the lifecycle of a store's interior design tends to be shorter than that of commercial spaces such as corporate offices or hotels. After all, retail establishment leases are shorter, walls and furnishings get dinged through continuous usage, brands are constantly rebranding and, with so many alternative distractions, consumers' attention spans are decreasing. It has become common for a shop to renovate after several years – or less – to try and regain market share. Increasingly, the store's real estate is being used in creative ways, particularly in places such as showrooms for lifestyle products, furnishings and appliances. Rather than just displaying merchandise in a passive fashion, many showrooms are opening up to become exhibition and event venues as well. Potential customers can get a taste, as it were, of the featured products through, say, a cooking demonstration, a private dinner or a group discussion, allowing them to form a more lasting bond with both the brand and the products they may

eventually own. As showrooms are transformed into event spaces, what they showcase get a nightlife that helps to bolster the brand.

Another frequently seen way to prolong a customer's stay in a retail space is to make the area a hybrid of sorts. Shops enhanced with small cafes and/or lounge areas foster a relaxing vibe, allowing customers to slow down, enjoy a snack and maybe return to the store for additional purchases. There are some retailers that naturally lend themselves to hybridisation; leisure and lifestyle stores such as those selling music, books and entertainment often feature an in-house cafe or a coffee counter. On the other end of the spectrum is the gourmet food retailer that offers a few chairs and tables for those who can't wait to tuck into the delicious pastries or chocolates they have just selected. As food porn becomes ever more prevalent through social media, good-looking eats have become the norm and showing off dishes in a chic retail setting has turned into something of a fine art.

In our material world today, it seems everything is for sale. Fast fashion and disposable commodities have captured the fancy of the general population to the point where some folks can no longer tell the difference between cheap goods produced with questionable labour in some underdeveloped or developing country, and a high-quality item produced locally – nor does it matter much to them. While some are not concerned with the means as long as they have the end-product, caveat emptor still rules. Customers' expectations are at an all-time high, and value for money has never been more critical. The savvy retailers understand that their brand's DNA must percolate through every aspect of the store's hardware and software, to give customers an all-round sensory experience that would, hopefully, generate future return trips.

In our annual retail issue, we look at some high-concept environments that go beyond merely selling. They titillate customers by enveloping them as if in a cocoon, lulling them into the brand's realm if only for a few moments in a busy day, to evoke an aspirational vision just within reach. By combining singular architecture, tactile materials and displays worthy of double-takes, these shops make the pulse race. We also pick the brains of some leading retail personalities in design and development to discuss recent trends, from large-scale shopping malls to what makes a successful showroom environment. Caution: you may want to hide your credit cards before flipping the page.

BRAND
PRODUCT
LOCATION
DESIGNER
SIZE
BUDGET
CONCEPT

Aime Patisserie
 Pastries
 Huangpu District, Shanghai, China
 Luk Studio
 63sq m
 Decent
 Macaroon becomes a design motif. Spatial experience not unlike unwrapping a present to discover tasty treat inside. Facade's enticing grid of translucent paper circles and semi-circles translated into a sloping ceiling pattern and back display wall within the boomerang-shaped shop. Two zones: foyer with bar and seating, and display counter behind. Colour palette expands from white to purple, yellow and red deeper within shop, while the facade's two dimensions extend to a third one.

MATERIALS
CRITIQUE

Glass, tile, terrazzo, paper, paint, Corian
 Delicate and refined, like products it showcases. Arcs and discs are part of modular system that do double duty as ceiling openings for spotlights and speakers or wall display shelves. A light-as-air standout along street teeming with doughnut and coffee franchise heavyweights. Bare minimum of furnishings; lack of clutter and adornment keeps attention on sweets.

PHOTOGRAPHY

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